



## **Learning to use the fiddle bow Part One**

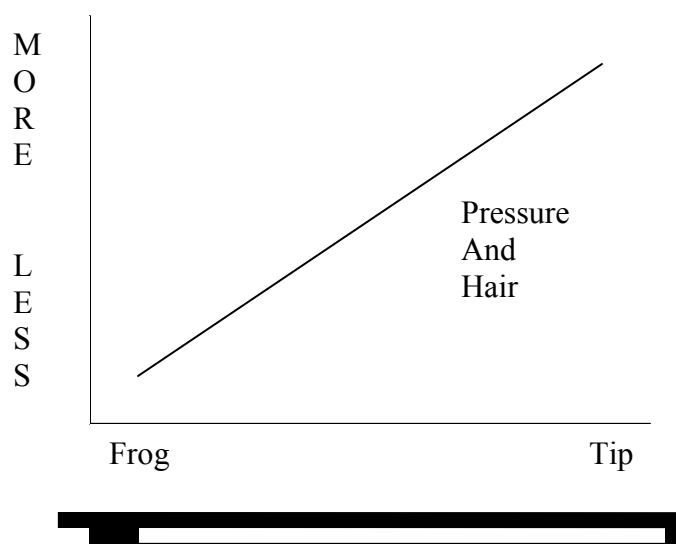
**By  
Carolyn Osborne**

It's not surprising that the hardest aspect of learning to play the fiddle is not the left hand—it's the fiddle bow. The fiddle bow produces the most obvious sound effect—yet while problematic intonation can be helped with tapes marking the proper finger positions on the fingerboard, there are few aids outside of practice for bowing. While children seem to tolerate bad sound at least long enough until they start making a good sound, in my experience adults have a hard time when the bow doesn't make the sound they want; this bow problem leads to a lot of frustration.

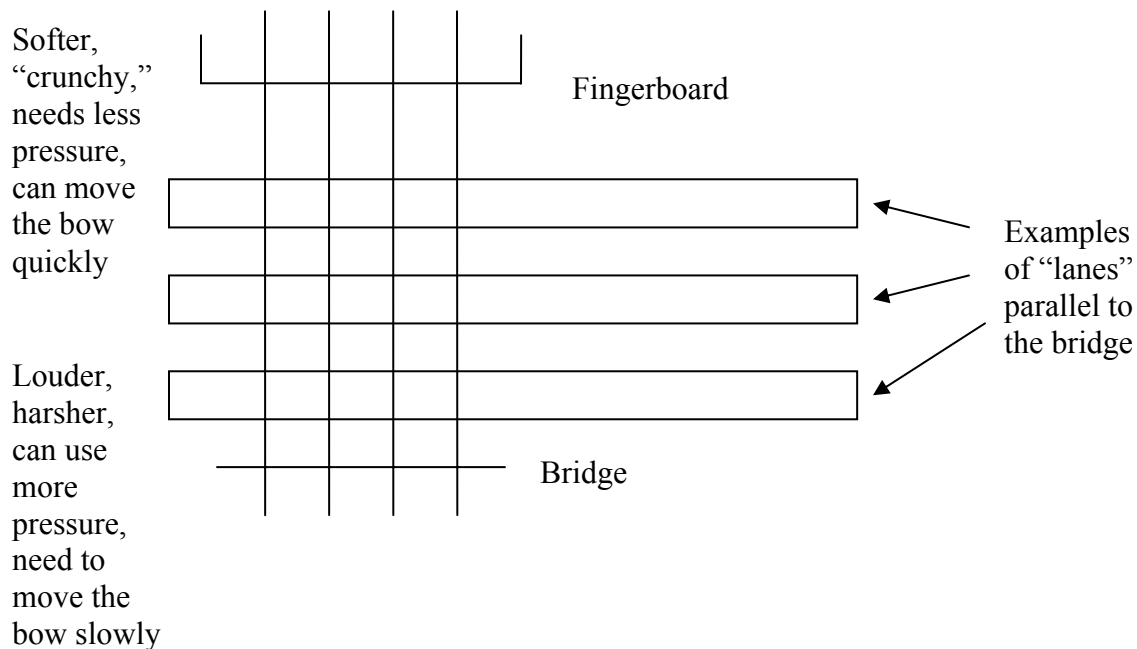
The question becomes, then, how can one practice bowing in order to learn it? First we need to understand what the nature of the task is, and from that understanding we can figure out ways to practice.

### **What is bowing?**

A violin bow has somewhere around 28" of hair that can be used to bow the four possible strings (GDAE) and the three possible string combinations: G and D, D and A, as well as A and E. The violin bow sounds best when it is played parallel to the bridge. Additional elements that contribute to sound include how far from the bridge one is playing, how much pressure is being used, and how fast the bow is moving (bow speed). Pressure is not only a function of actively placing pressure on the bow but also a function of hand weight: the weight of your hand is stronger at the frog than when you are playing at the tip. One final factor is how much hair you have on the string at a given time, from just a few hairs to a lot of hair.



Two factors work in the same way, as the above graph suggests: the closer to the frog you are, the less pressure and hair you need to use. To lessen the amount of hair on the string, tip the wood of the bow toward the fingerboard so that fewer hairs contact the string. To increase the amount of hair on the string, make sure the bow hair is flat on the string. To decrease pressure, allow your arm to support the weight of your hand. To increase pressure, use your wrist as torque, transferring weight to the bow through your index finger.



The above graph demonstrates how three factors (“lane,” pressure, and bow speed) work in concert: the “lane” you are in (how far from the bridge you are playing, keeping the bow in the same “lane” and parallel to the bridge) can help you to control the loudness of your playing. The further from the bridge you are, the softer you will tend to play. You can make your playing softer by lightening up on the pressure. In fact, if you play with too much pressure close to the fingerboard, you will end up with a sort of crunchy sound that doesn’t have much pitch to it. You can move the bow more quickly to help the sound, keeping in mind that the speed of the bow does not determine the tempo of the tune you are playing—bow speed is how many inches per note you are playing. A fast bow might be 1” per eighth note and a slower bow speed would be ½” per eighth note.

The closer to the bridge you play, the louder your playing will be. You will likely find yourself needing to use more pressure to keep the sound from becoming harsh. Also, moving the bow more slowly will help with the quality of sound. You may have to find a happy combination of bow speed and pressure for your instrument when you get close to the bridge.

Part Two of this article in the next issue.

**bio**

Carolyn Osborne is the co-director of the Gahanna-Lincoln High School fiddlers, Gahanna, Ohio. She teaches in the Dept. of Education at Capital University.